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THE PENINSULA

American Public Opinion on US Foreign Policy in East Asia and the Korean Peninsula

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Category: The United States



This piece is part of a series based upon the fifth annual survey commissioned by KEI and conducted by YouGov. On Thursday, October 10, KEI will host an event and release a report summarizing the results from the annual KEI/YouGov poll at our Washington, D.C. office.

American public opinion on US foreign policy may be subject to major changes due to recent developments in the Middle East, Europe, and the Indo-Pacific. What do these changes imply for American public attitudes about East Asia and the Korean Peninsula? How do they influence the bilateral relationship and the alliance? KEI commissioned YouGov to survey over a thousand Americans from September 3 to 13, 2024, in order to consider these questions and the implications for the future of the bilateral relationship.

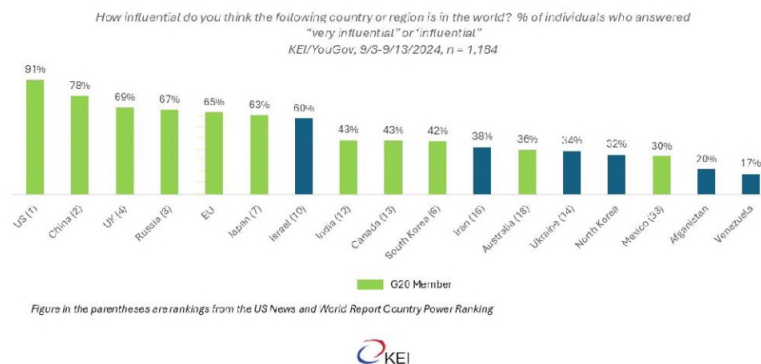
Global Influence: The United States Still Great

KEI/YouGov explored the question of relative influence of various countries on the world stage by asking each of its respondents to rate the level of influence of a given country. Although there is some debate about how the United States should assert its own influence globally, the KEI/YouGov survey shows that 91 percent of Americans rated the United States as either a “very influential” or “fairly influential” country among the list of countries or regions presented. This was an increase of 3 points from 2023 and aligns with the finding from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs’ October 2023 study, which showed that most participants consistently viewed the United States as having global

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influence. Running second was China (78 percent), followed by the United Kingdom (69 percent), Russia (67 percent), and Japan (63 percent). Notably, 42 percent of Americans rated South Korea as very influential or fairly influential. Of the countries that were listed, Israel was the highest-ranked non-G20 member nation, listed at 60 percent as the most influential country. This was a 10-point increase from 2023, when only 50 percent of Americans stated that Israel was a very or fairly influential country in the same list of countries provided. It is likely that the conflict between Israel and Hamas played some role in shaping this view.

Figure 1: Americans have a generally informed understanding about the relative influence of nation-states on the world stage.

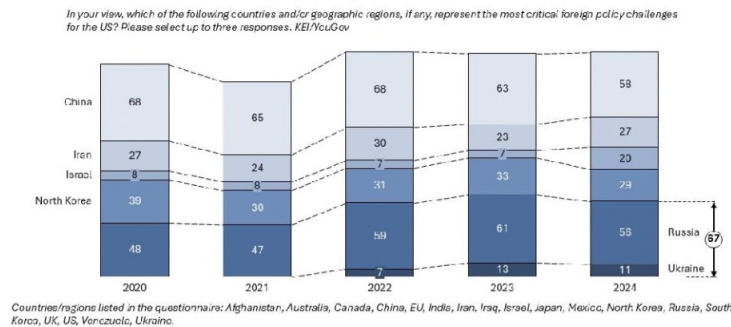


This result is broadly consistent with the results of the [US News and World Report](#) ranking the most powerful countries, which cardinally orders countries by giving equal weight to global leadership, economic influence, export performance, political influence, international alliances, and military power.

Critical Foreign Policy Challenge

When asked to name the most critical foreign policy challenge facing the United States, 58 percent of the surveyed respondents named China. Although this is a significant decline from 68 percent in 2022, China is still viewed as a challenge by the highest number of respondents, followed by Russia (56 percent), North Korea (29 percent), Iran (27 percent), Israel (20 percent), and Ukraine (11 percent). This finding aligns with the results of other studies, such as the one by the [Chicago Council on Global Affairs](#) in November 2023 and the [Pew Research Center](#) in April 2024, that showed China and Russia consistently gaining more attention than other geopolitical challenges among the American public. An important takeaway from the findings is that the American public remains squarely focused on East Asia, including the threats posed by China and North Korea, despite ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

Figure 2: Despite the emergence of conflicts in Middle East and Eastern Europe, China and North Korea are regarded by most Americans as critical foreign policy challenges.

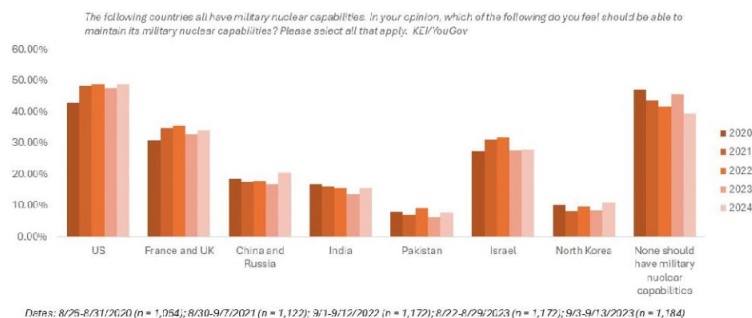


The data also suggests that the American public sees the challenge associated with Ukraine as being linked to Russia. The number of respondents who saw Russia as a critical foreign policy challenge spiked (an increase of 12 points) significantly in 2022 when the conflict in Ukraine first began, and it has remained fairly consistent in 2023 and 2024.

Nuclear Capabilities and Proliferation

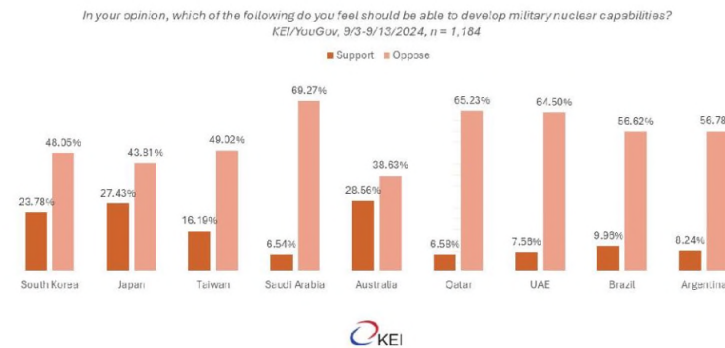
An ongoing concern is the potential for nuclear proliferation. Americans surveyed by YouGov seemed split on questions related to nuclear weapons. When asked which nuclear-weapon state should be able to *maintain* its military nuclear capabilities, just under half (49 percent) of surveyed Americans answered the United States. 39 percent answered that “no country should possess military nuclear capabilities.” This result is consistent with previous public poll findings that showed that 47 percent of Americans believed that nuclear weapons make the United States safer. In general, Americans were more supportive of nuclear weapons among allies like France (29.6 percent), the United Kingdom (37.62 percent), and Israel (29.25 percent) and less so for adversaries like China (16.9 percent), Russia (19.7 percent), and North Korea (9.6 percent). The KEI/YouGov survey result also suggests that a sizable number of Americans are unenthusiastic about any country possessing nuclear weapons capabilities, even while acknowledging their deterrent value.

Figure 3: In general, Americans are skeptical about nuclear weapons.



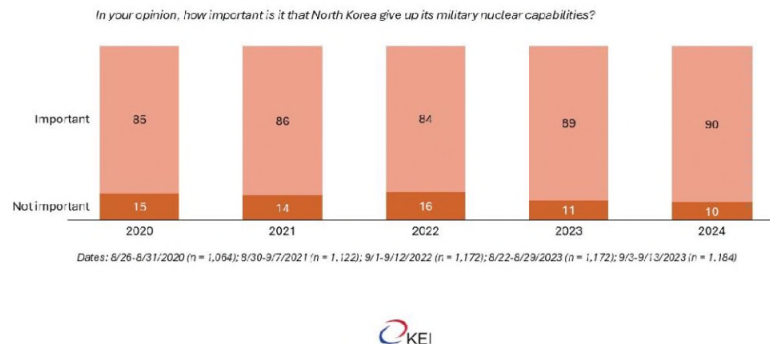
Among those who have an opinion, Americans also appear generally opposed to the idea of countries *developing* their own nuclear capabilities if they do not already possess them. For instance, Australia received the highest support for developing an independent nuclear capability at 28.6 percent (opposition: 38.6 percent)—Japan was next at 27.4 percent (opposition: 43.8 percent) and South Korea at 23.8 percent (opposition: 48 percent). In each case, opposition to nuclear development was *always* the modal answer. In terms of magnitude, opposition was highest among countries in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia (support: 6.5 percent; oppose: 69.3 percent), Qatar (support: 6.6 percent; oppose: 65.2 percent), and the UAE (support: 7.6 percent; oppose: 64.5 percent). On average, Americans were almost four times as likely to oppose non-nuclear weapon states developing their own nuclear capabilities while showing relatively greater acceptance of nuclear development among allies than among adversaries.

Figure 4: Americans do not favor the development of nuclear capability by non-nuclear states.



North Korean Nuclear Issue

Figure 5: Americans have never lost sight of the importance of the North Korea's denuclearization.

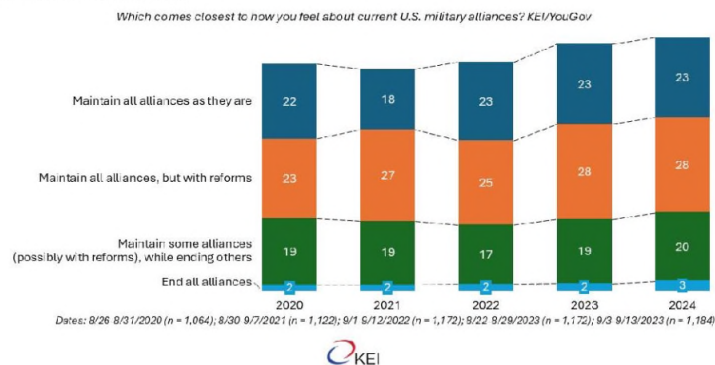


Given the above findings on American attitudes toward nuclear weapons, it should not be a surprise to find broad and persistent opposition to North Korea's nuclear program. The data confirms that the importance of this issue has only grown over time, as nearly 90 percent of surveyed Americans consider this an important issue, increasing from 84 percent in 2022. These findings confirm results reported by the [Chicago Council on Global Affairs](#) in August 2024, which showed that 52 percent of Americans stated that

North Korea's nuclear program posed a critical threat to the United States. The Pew Research Center's recent work on this topic also revealed that four in ten Americans see limiting North Korea's influence as an important foreign policy priority.

Military Alliances and Regional Cooperation

Figure 6: Americans see value in maintaining an alliance network, but increasingly prefer a more selective approach to perpetuation of alliances relations.

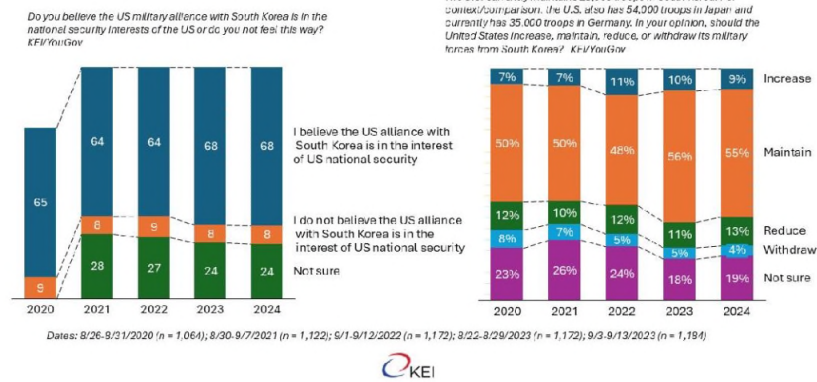


In thinking about US military alliances around the world, Americans have been generally positive—51 percent favor maintaining existing alliances in some form but desire some changes. Only 23 percent of those surveyed expressed support for maintaining the status quo. A plurality of those surveyed preferred that the United States take a more selective approach to alliance management by pursuing reforms within respective alliance relationships. Only 4 percent supported ending all alliances. Cross-temporal comparison shows that the overall desire to maintain existing alliances in some form increased from 45 percent in 2020 to 51 percent in 2024.

US Troop Presence on the Korean Peninsula

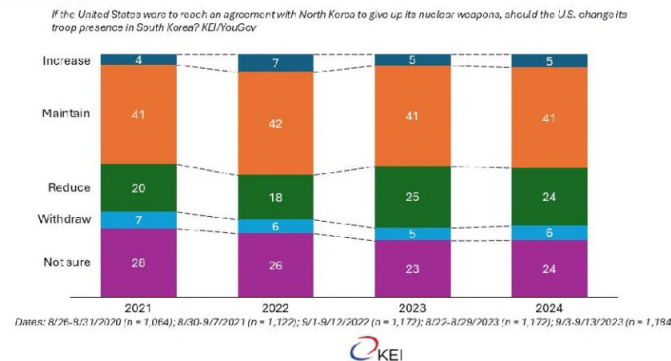
To explore American views on US Forces in Korea (USFK), the survey asked whether the United States should maintain, reduce, or withdraw its military forces from South Korea. 64 percent supported increasing or maintaining the current troop level, and 13 percent expressed a desire to reduce the troop level. Notably, only 4 percent expressed a desire to withdraw from South Korea completely. This finding suggests that while 48 percent of Americans have expressed a desire to make changes to the existing alliance network, as discussed above, there is broad support for not making any downward changes to the existing troop level in South Korea.

Figure 7: There is robust support for maintaining US troops on the Korean Peninsula and that US-ROK alliance is in US national interest.



A large portion of the American public (68 percent) sees the US military alliance with South Korea as aligned with the national security interest of the United States. This figure has remained relatively unchanged since KEI/YouGov first began asking this question in 2021. Similar results have been confirmed by [numerous studies](#) on both sides of this relationship.

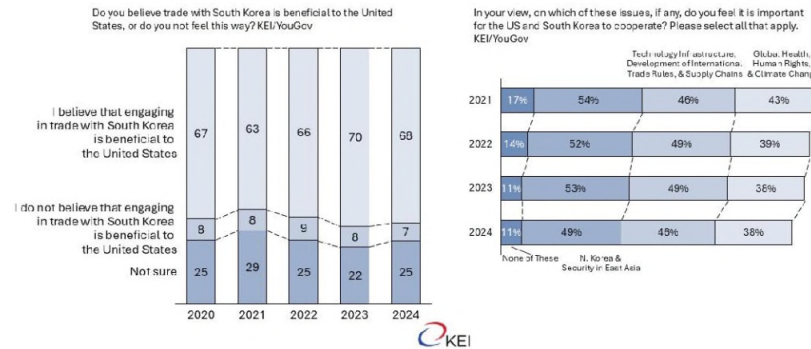
Figure 8: If North Korea were to give up its nuclear weapon, a plurality of Americans would still support a continued US troop presence on the Korean Peninsula. Only 7 percent would support full withdrawal.



When asked whether the United States should increase, maintain, reduce, or withdraw USFK forces on the Korean Peninsula if North Korea were to give up its nuclear weapons, support for increasing or maintaining the troop presence declined to 46.8 percent. This is twice as large as the number of individuals who supported troop reduction (23.6 percent) and the number of respondents unsure of the impact on the US force presence (24 percent). A little under 6 percent stated that they would like the troops withdrawn in this case. The above data suggests that support for the military alliance between the United States and South Korea would continue even if the North Korean threat recedes, highlighting the durability of the US-South Korea alliance in light of growing uncertainties in regional geopolitics.

US-South Korea Relations Remain Steady

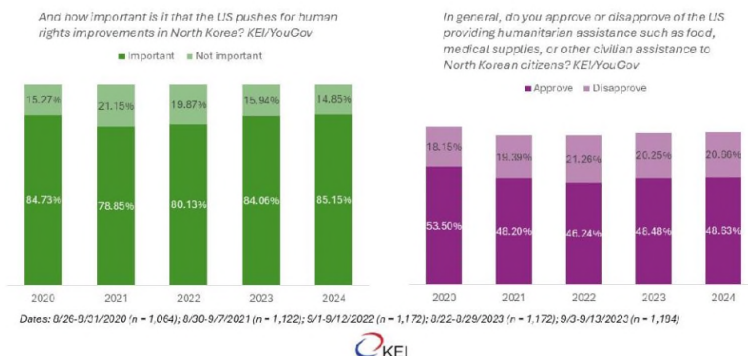
On other alliance-related matters, 68 percent of respondents stated that they believed “engaging in trade with South Korea is beneficial to the United States,” in comparison to the 7 percent who said that they did “not believe that engaging in trade with South Korea is beneficial to the United States.”

Figure 9: Americans see trade with South Korea as beneficial to the United States.

When asked to select the most important issues for cooperation between the two countries, the two leading sets of issues were regional security matters (49 percent) and technology and economy (46 percent). Issues linked to the non-traditional security domain, such as global health, human rights, and climate change, were considered by respondents as less important (38 percent).

North Korean Human Rights and Humanitarian Assistance

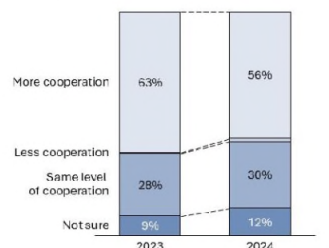
An area of cooperation between the United States and South Korea that has been emphasized under the Yoon Suk-yeol administration is the issue of North Korean human rights. When asked, “How important is it that the United States pushes for human rights improvements in North Korea,” 85 percent responded that it is important to do so. This result has not changed since KEI/YouGov first polled this data in 2020. However, when asked about humanitarian assistance to the North Korean people, only 49 percent of respondents approved—this also has not shown significant change during the last five years.

Figure 10: American public attitudes on North Korean human rights and humanitarian assistance has not changed much.

US-Korea-Japan Trilateral Engagement

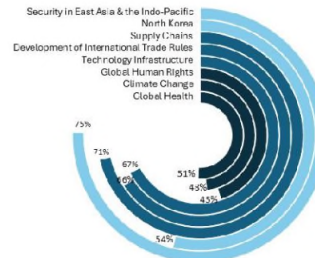
Figure 11: Among those individuals who selected Japan and South Korea as “critical partners,” 86 percent expressed a desire for more or same level of cooperation between the US, South Korea, and Japan with an emphasis on economic and regional security.

If you view both South Korea and Japan as critical partners, how should the United States approach three-way cooperation with South Korea and Japan? KEI/YouGov



Dates: 8/22-9/29/2023 (n = 460); 9/3-9/13/2023 (n = 410)

In what areas should the United States, South Korea, and Japan deepen cooperation? Select all that apply. KEI/YouGov, 8/3-9/13/2024, n = 245



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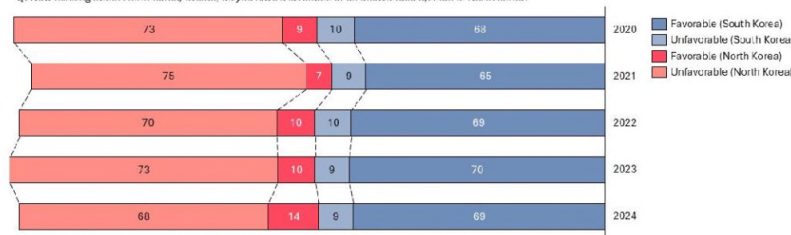
Among those that selected South Korea and Japan as a “critical partner” (34.6 percent), the KEI/YouGov survey asked whether they would like to see more, similar, or less cooperation between the United States, South Korea, and Japan. A large majority of respondents support more cooperation between the three countries. 57 percent expressed support for more cooperation, and 30 percent stated that they would like to see a similar level of cooperation. Only 2 percent wanted less cooperation in the trilateral relationship. Among those that supported more cooperation, 75 percent expressed a desire for enhanced cooperation in national security, 71 percent in supply chains, 66 percent in the development of international trade rules, 67 percent in technology infrastructure (like 5G), and 54 percent on North Korea. The lowest levels of support were toward global health (51 percent), climate change (48 percent), and global health (45 percent).

The Tale of Two Koreas

Figure 12: American unfavorability toward North Korea remains equivalent to American favorability toward South Korea.

Q: Overall, do you have a favorable or an unfavorable opinion of South Korea?

Q: Now thinking about North Korea, overall, do you have a favorable or an unfavorable opinion of North Korea?



Dates: 6/26-8/31/2020 (n = 1,064); 8/30-9/7/2021 (n = 1,122); 9/1-9/12/2022 (n = 1,172); 8/22-9/29/2023 (n = 1,172); 9/3-9/13/2023 (n = 1,184)

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The Korean Peninsula serves as a story of contrast between the totalitarian North and the democratic South. Therefore, it tracks that American public attitudes about the two Koreas differ as well. KEI/YouGov polling since 2020 has consistently found that American favorability toward South Korea is equivalent to unfavorability toward North Korea. Given the nature and focus of the US-South Korea alliance and North Korea's hostility toward dialogue with the United States, it appears likely that American attitudes toward South and North Korea will continue in opposition with one another.

Methodology

Matched and Weighted Sample Size (n) and Margin of Error (MoE) by Date:

September 3-13, 2024 (Sample Size: 1,184; MoE: +/-3.22 percent, 95 percent CI);

August 22-29, 2023 (Sample Size: 1,172; MoE: +/-3.5 percent at 95 percent CI);

September 1-12, 2022 (Sample Size: 1,172; MoE: +/-3.5 percent at 95 percent CI);

August 30-7, 2021 (Sample Size 1,122; MoE: +/-3.25 percent at 95 percent CI);

August 26-31, 2020 (Sample Size: 1,064; MoE: +/-2.95 percent at 95 percent CI)

Interview Method: Web Only (English)

Organization: YouGov

Dr. Je Heon (James) Kim is the Interim Director at the Korea Economic Institute of America (KEI). Andy Hong and Jennifer Ahn are Program Officers at KEI. Scott A. Snyder is President and Chief Executive Officer at KEI. The views expressed here are the authors' alone.

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Return to the Peninsula

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